

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

ROBERT ALEXANDER KASEBERG,
Plainti

v.
CONACO, LLC; TURNER
BROADCASTING SYSTEM; TIME
WARNER, INC.; CONAN O'BRIEN;
JEFF ROSS; MIKE SWEENEY; DOES
1-10, inclusive.

Case No.: 15-CV-1637 JLS (RNB)

**ORDER GRANTING MOTION FOR
LEAVE TO FILE AN AMENDED
ANSWER**

(ECF No. 154)

Presently before the Court is Defendants' Motion for Leave to File an Amended Answer, ("MTN," ECF No. 154). Also before the Court is Plaintiff's Response in Opposition to the Motion, ("Opp'n," ECF No. 156), and Defendants' Reply in Support of the Motion, ("Reply," ECF No. 158). In sum, Defendants seek leave to amend their answer "to include the affirmative defenses of (1) fraud on the Copyright Office and (2) unclean hands, in light of Plaintiff Robert Alexander Kaseberg and his counsel's misconduct before the Copyright Office and this Court." (MTN 5.)¹ After considering the Parties' arguments and the law, the Court rules as follows.

¹ Pin citations refer to the CM/ECF page numbers electronically stamped at the top of each page.

BACKGROUND

2 Plaintiff Robert Alexander Kaseberg filed a Complaint against Defendants Conaco,
3 LLC; Turner Broadcasting System; Time Warner, Inc.; Conan O'Brien; Jeff Ross; and
4 Mike Sweeney alleging copyright infringement. ("Compl," ECF No. 1.) Defendants filed
5 answers to the Complaint. (ECF No. 3 (by Conaco, LLC); ECF No. 11 (by Time Warner,
6 Inc., and Turner Broadcasting System); ECF No. 11 (by Conan O'Brien, Jeff Ross, and
7 Mike Sweeney).) Plaintiff then filed an Amended Complaint, ("FAC," ECF No. 58), and
8 all Defendants answered, ("Answer," ECF No. 59). In sum, Plaintiff brought suit for
9 Defendants' alleged infringement of five of Plaintiff's jokes. (FAC ¶¶ 14–27.) The present
10 Motion relates only to the "Tom Brady Joke."

11 Defendants filed a Motion for Summary Judgment, (“MSJ,” ECF No. 70-1). The
12 Court granted in part and denied in part the Motion. (“MSJ Order,” ECF No. 131.) As
13 relevant to the Tom Brady Joke, Defendants moved for summary judgment arguing that
14 Plaintiff lacked standing to maintain an infringement action as to this joke. Defendants
15 argued Plaintiff had not produced copyright applications or registrations for the Tom Brady
16 Joke. (MSJ Order 8.) Plaintiff then attached copyright applications for the joke to his
17 opposition to the MSJ. (*Id.*) The Court concluded that Plaintiff’s failure to timely disclose
18 his copyright applications was not outcome-determinative. (*Id.*) While Plaintiff had failed
19 to timely produce the required disclosure, this failure was harmless within the meaning of
20 Rule 37(c) and Defendants were not prejudiced. (*Id.* at 9.) The Court denied summary
21 judgment for this ground but permitted Defendants leave to reopen discovery and leave to
22 file a dispositive motion if warranted, i.e., if Defendants “discover fatal deficiencies in
23 Plaintiff’s applications.” (*Id.* at 10.)

24 Also in their MSJ, Defendants requested summary judgment on the following issue:
25 Plaintiff's "allegedly infringed works are entitled to, at best, 'thin' copyright protection,
26 and he cannot establish that the allegedly infringing works are 'virtually identical' to his
27 works." (*Id.* at 7 (citing ECF No. 70, at 1).) The Court stated "that Plaintiff's jokes are
28 entitled to only 'thin' copyright protection." (*Id.* at 21.) As to the Tom Brady joke, the

1 Court found “while not exactly identical, [Plaintiff’s and Defendant’s] jokes are
2 sufficiently objectively virtually identical to create a triable issue of fact regarding whether
3 a jury would find these objective similarities to be virtually identical within the context of
4 the entire joke.” (*Id.* at 23.) The Court denied summary judgment on this issue.

5 After the MSJ Order, Plaintiff produced documents to Defendants. Based on these
6 documents, Defendants now request leave to add two affirmative defenses to their answer
7 based on alleged misrepresentations in Plaintiff’s various correspondences with the
8 Copyright Office.

9 **LEGAL STANDARD**

10 Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 15(a), a plaintiff may amend its complaint
11 once as a matter of course within specified time limits. Fed. R. Civ. P. 15(a)(1). “In all
12 other cases, a party may amend its pleading only with the opposing party’s written consent
13 or the court’s leave. The court should freely give leave when justice so requires.” Fed. R.
14 Civ. P. 15(a)(2).

15 While courts exercise broad discretion in deciding whether to allow amendment,
16 they have generally adopted a liberal policy. *See United States ex rel. Ehmcke Sheet Metal*
17 *Works v. Wausau Ins. Cos.*, 755 F. Supp. 906, 908 (E.D. Cal. 1991) (citing *Jordan v. Cnty.*
18 *of L.A.*, 669 F.2d 1311, 1324 (9th Cir. 1982), *rev’d on other grounds*, 459 U.S. 810 (1982)).
19 Accordingly, leave is generally granted unless the court harbors concerns “such as undue
20 delay, bad faith or dilatory motive on the part of the movant, repeated failure to cure
21 deficiencies by amendments previously allowed, undue prejudice to the opposing party by
22 virtue of allowance of the amendment, futility of amendment, etc.” *Foman v. Davis*, 371
23 U.S. 178, 182 (1962). The non-moving party bears the burden of showing why leave to
24 amend should not be granted. *Genentech, Inc. v. Abbott Labs.*, 127 F.R.D. 529, 530–31
25 (N.D. Cal. 1989).

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ANALYSIS

As noted above, Defendants seek to amend their answer to include the affirmative defenses of (1) fraud on the Copyright Office; and (2) unclean hands. (MTN 5.) The Court analyzes both proposed affirmative defenses.

I. Fraud on the Copyright Office

A certificate of registration from the Copyright Office constitutes “prima facie evidence of the validity of the copyright and of the facts stated in the certificate.” 17 U.S.C. § 410(c). “To rebut the presumption [of validity], an infringement defendant must simply offer some evidence or proof to dispute or deny the plaintiff’s prima facie case of infringement.” *United Fabrics Int’l, Inc. v. C&J Wear, Inc.*, 630 F.3d 1255, 1257 (9th Cir. 2011). A defendant may rebut the presumption of validity by showing evidence that the certificate of registration contains inaccurate information that: (1) was included with knowledge that it was inaccurate; and (2) would have caused the Register of Copyrights to refuse registration. 17 U.S.C. § 411(b)(1). “[I]nadvertent mistakes on registration certificates do not invalidate a copyright and thus do not bar infringement actions, unless the alleged infringer has relied to its detriment on the mistake, or the claimant intended to defraud the Copyright Office by making the misstatement.” *Urantia Found. v. Maaherra*, 114 F.3d 955, 963 (9th Cir. 1997). “Absent intent to defraud and prejudice, inaccuracies in copyright registration do not bar actions for infringement.” *Harris v. Emus Records Corp.*, 734 F.2d 1329, 1335 (9th Cir. 1984).

In support of their allegation of fraud, Defendants point to Plaintiff’s May 30, 2017 letter to the Copyright Office, wherein he requested the Copyright Office reconsider registering the Tom Brady Joke (“the work”). (See ECF No. 156-1, at 91.) In this letter, Plaintiff noted that the Copyright Office had previously refused his request for registration and also refused his first request for reconsideration. He again requested reconsideration, noting the pending litigation in this Court and stating that “the basis for this second reconsideration is that the Court ruled at Summary Judgment on May 9, 2017 that ‘there is little doubt that the jokes at issue merit copyright protection.’” (Id. (citing and attaching

1 the MSJ Order.) The Copyright Office then reversed its previous refusal to register the
2 copyright claim in the work and registered the work. (ECF No. 156-2, at 9–10.)²
3 Defendants argue that Plaintiff misrepresented to the Copyright Office that the Court found
4 the Tom Brady joke met the originality requirements of the Copyright Act. Defendants
5 argue the language Plaintiff quoted from the MSJ Order was only dicta and “it was assumed
6 that all of the jokes at issue were copyrightable for the purpose of determining ‘the
7 appropriate standard for evaluating the level of similarity between the works here at
8 issue.’” (MTN 12 (quoting MSJ Order 18).) Plaintiff argues Defendants’ proposed
9 affirmative defenses are futile for various reasons and asks that the Court to treat his
10 opposition as his motion to dismiss the affirmative defenses. (Opp’n 6.)

11 “[A] proposed amendment is futile only if no set of facts can be proved under the
12 amendment to the pleadings that would constitute a valid and sufficient claim or defense.”
13 *Miller v. Rykoff-Sexton, Inc.*, 845 F.2d 209, 214 (9th Cir. 1988). Courts ordinarily do not
14 consider the validity of a proposed amended pleading in deciding whether to grant leave to
15 amend, and instead defer consideration of challenges to the merits of a proposed
16 amendment until after leave to amend is granted and the amended pleadings are filed.
17 *Netbula, LLC v. Distinct Corp.*, 212 F.R.D. 534, 539 (N.D. Cal. 2003) (citation omitted);
18 *accord Green Valley Corp. v. Caldo Oil Co.*, No. 09cv4028-LHK, 2011 WL 1465883, at
19 *6 (N.D. Cal. Apr. 18, 2011) (noting “the general preference against denying a motion for
20 leave to amend based on futility”). Arguments concerning the sufficiency of the proposed
21 pleadings, even if meritorious, are better left for briefing on a motion to dismiss. *Lillis v.*
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25 ² Plaintiff requests the Court take judicial notice of the Copyright Office’s “decision reversing the refusal
26 to register the September 3, 2015 Tom Brady Joke application.” (ECF No. 156-2, at 1.) Defendants do
27 not oppose this request. The Court **GRANTS** the request and takes judicial notice of the letter from the
28 Copyright Office dated July 17, 2017. (See ECF No. 156-2, at 9–10.) Plaintiff also requests the Court
take judicial notice of two other documents, “Form TX,” and “the Public Catalog for registration
TX0008351767.” (ECF No. 156-2.) The Court finds the requested judicial notice unnecessary for these
two documents and therefore **DENIES** the request.

1 *Apria Healthcare*, No. 12cv52-IEG (KSC), 2012 WL 4760908, at * 1 (S.D. Cal. Oct. 5,
2 2012).

3 Although Plaintiff requests the Court treat his opposition as a motion to dismiss, the
4 Court finds it would be more appropriate to consider a fully-briefed dispositive motion
5 regarding the affirmative defenses, if Plaintiff deems one is appropriate. *See id.* (“[T]he
6 Court will not indulge Defendants’ attempt to convert Plaintiff’s motion to amend into a
7 premature motion to dismiss.”). The Court finds that justice requires granting Defendants
8 leave to amend their answer to add the affirmative defense of fraud on the copyright office.

9 **II. Unclean Hands**

10 The doctrine of unclean hands “bars relief to a plaintiff who has violated conscience,
11 good faith or other equitable principles in his prior conduct, as well as to a plaintiff who
12 has dirtied his hands in acquiring the right presently asserted.” *Dollar Sys., Inc. v. Avcar*
13 *Leasing Sys., Inc.*, 890 F.2d 165, 173 (9th Cir. 1989). To prevail on a defense of unclean
14 hands, a defendant must demonstrate “that the plaintiff’s conduct is inequitable and that
15 the conduct relates to the subject matter of [the plaintiff’s] claims.” *Fuddruckers Inc. v.*
16 *Doc’s B.R. Others, Inc.*, 826 F.2d 837, 847 (9th Cir. 1987) (citing *CIBA-GEIGY Corp. v.*
17 *Bolar Pharm.*, 747 F.2d 844, 855 (3d Cir. 1984)); *see also TrafficSchool.com, Inc. v.*
18 *Edriver, Inc.*, 653 F.3d 820, 833 (9th Cir. 2011) (holding that a defendant must demonstrate
19 that an unclean hands defense applies with “clear, convincing evidence”).

20 Defendants’ allegation of unclean hands is broader than their allegation of fraud on
21 the copyright office. (Reply 11.) The proposed unclean hand defense covers more of
22 Plaintiff’s communication with the Copyright Office than just the May 30, 2017 letter.
23 (MTN 14.) Plaintiff again argues futility, arguing that Defendants cannot plead unclean
24 hands as a matter of law. (Opp’n 20.) For the same reason as addressed above, the Court
25 finds the defense of futility is better left for briefing on a separate motion. The Court finds
26 that justice requires granting Defendants leave to amend their answer to add the affirmative
27 defense of unclean hands.

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1 **III. Sanctions**

2 Plaintiff requests the Court sanction Defendants for bringing the present Motion.
3 (Opp'n 21.) The Court does not find a basis for sanctions and **DENIES** Plaintiff's request.

4 **CONCLUSION**

5 The Court **GRANTS** Defendants' Motion for Leave to File an Amended Answer.
6 Defendants **SHALL** file the amended answer attached to their Motion within five (5) days
7 of the electronic docketing of this Order.

8 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

9 Dated: April 13, 2018

Janis L. Sammartino
10 Hon. Janis L. Sammartino
11 United States District Judge

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